

NORTH CAROLINIANS *of* NOTE

John Coltrane

Revolutionary jazz musician

By Maria Gontaruk

John Coltrane is considered one of the greatest saxophonists of all time and one of the most influential jazz musicians of the twentieth century. He recorded over 100 albums, live and in the studio, and worked on his own and with other great jazz musicians, such as Miles Davis.

Coltrane, born Sept. 23, 1926, in Hamlet, N.C., grew up in High Point where he played clarinet and listened to big band music. After graduating from high school, he moved to Philadelphia hoping to play music professionally. As Coltrane switched from clarinet to alto saxophone and later to tenor sax, his voice found its full expression.

He was drafted into the Navy and stationed in Hawaii during WWII where he continued to play music in the U.S. Navy Band. After the war, he made his first recordings, including his first recorded solo on "Hot House."

Gradually but steadily, Coltrane's musical style changed. His talent and imaginative approaches began to reshape modern jazz. His early work was more conventional; his later, more experimental. The high point of his career spans 1955-1967.

His work with the Miles Davis Quintet in 1958 led to his own musical evolution, according to his biography on JohnColtrane.com. Coltrane took bop to the breaking point, playing groups of notes with extreme speed. In *Down Beat* magazine, critic Ira Gitler referred to this as Coltrane's "sheets of sound."

This technique represented Coltrane's first major contribution to the revolution of jazz, according to the *Socialist Review* article, John Coltrane: "All That Jazz." At this time, he was regarded as the most important tenor saxophonist in jazz. He was inducted into the *Down Beat* Jazz Hall of Fame in 1965.

By 1960, he had left Miles Davis to form his own quartet and revolution-

ized jazz further. With his new band, he popularized the use of bass and piano and created a unique sound, more adventurous than before with hard bop as a backdrop.

Coltrane wanted his music to create positive thought patterns in the minds of his listeners, Martin Smith wrote in *Socialist Review*. He changed from using as many chords as possible to playing over one- or two-chord vamps. His music dropped most of the melodies and became passionate explorations of sound.

Coltrane refused to accept musical boundaries, and he liked to improvise, according to the John Coltrane biography on the Number One Stars website. He determined to make each performance "a whole expression of one's being," he said in a 1966 interview.

Coltrane shifted finally to free jazz. He regularly practiced 12 hours a day, motivated by his belief in the universality of music. He began playing two-hour improvised solos, not reading music or planning what he would play next.

Coltrane grew up in the South in an era of racial segregation. His music was influenced by the civil rights movement that was sweeping the U.S. in the late 1950s and 1960s, Smith explained.

After four young black girls were killed when white supremacists bombed a church in Alabama, he recorded two new songs: "Your Lady" and "Alabama." He played them at eight benefit concerts in support of Martin Luther King Jr.'s protests against the attack, the author of *Number One Stars* wrote.

Coltrane died from liver cancer in 1967 at age 40, but his influence on jazz continued. In 1972, *A Love Supreme* was certified gold by the RIAA for selling more than half a million copies in Japan. This album, as well as *My Favorite Things*, was certified gold in the



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United States in 2001. In 1982, Coltrane was awarded a posthumous Grammy for "Best Jazz Solo Performance" on the album *Bye Bye Blackbird*, and, in 1997, was awarded the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award. In 2007, the Pulitzer Prize Board cited Coltrane for "innovated and influential work" and his "'indelible impact on music.'"

Coltrane remains a jazz icon. His work inspires musicians to experiment, take chances and devote themselves to their craft.

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